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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/20/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: CONGRESS AND POLITICAL CLASS SHAKEN BY
PARAMILITARY TIES

REF: BOGOTA 10956

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer - Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary. The arrest of three congressmen for paramilitary ties--and the prospect of more such arrests--has shaken the Colombian political class, and weakened President Uribe's congressional coalition. U Party insiders claim new leadership elections scheduled for November 26 will revive the party, but the scandal has exacerbated internal party tensions. U Party Senator Marta Lucia Ramirez said the arrests offer an opportunity to clean up Colombia's political parties. Still, presidential advisors said the arrests will complicate efforts to advance Uribe's legislative agenda and will damage the President's public image. FM Maria Araujo, whose brothers are reportedly implicated in the para scandal, offered to resign on November 17, but President Uribe not accept the resignation and offered full support for the FM. End Summary.

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Arrests Shake Congress and Political Class

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¶2. (C) On November 10, the Colombian Supreme Court indicted Senator Jairo Enrique Merlano Fernandez (U Party), Senator Alvaro Garcia Romero (Colombia Democratica), and Representative Eric Morris (Colombia Democratica) for alleged involvement in a paramilitary bloc in Sucre Department, creating a new crisis within the Congress and Uribe's Congressional coalition (see reftel). The Supreme Court is reportedly considering investigating up to 90 former and current members of Congress, and more indictments are expected. "El Tiempo" reports that politicians from Magdalena, Cordoba, Cesar, Bolivar, La Guajira and Atlantico departments are especially vulnerable. Our contacts agree that given the pervasive paramilitary presence in the North Coast in the past, some level of contact would have been unavoidable.

¶3. (C) Paramilitary ties to Congress will likely affect parties from across the spectrum. Liberal Party Secretary General Jose Noe told us he expected some Liberal Party politicians to be linked to the paras; Polo Senator Jaime Dussan said he would not be surprised to hear at least one Polo name surface. Still, President Uribe's coalition and the U Party have been the most seriously damaged to date. Merlano's arrest generated a bitter debate within the U Party as to whether he should be suspended. The Party finally suspended him on November 14. At least six additional senators from the Uribe coalition--the U Party, Cambio Radical, Alas Equipo, and Colombia Democratica--were named by

leading daily "El Tiempo" as suspect. Numerous contacts told us it was likely Senator Alvaro Araujo (Foreign Minister Maria Araujo's brother) would be indicted for paramilitary ties in Cesar. An arrest warrant has already been issued for another brother, Sergio, for suspicion of being a para money man. FM Araujo offered her resignation to President Uribe on November 17; the President did not accept it and expressed his full support for the FM.

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Uribe Coalition Troubles Intensify

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14. (C) On November 14, "El Tiempo" quoted U Party Senators Martha Lucia Ramirez, Armando Benedetti and Gina Parody as threatening to resign from the party over the indictments. The scandal follows weeks of infighting and drift within the party which lacks internal cohesion as well as strong leadership. U Party founder and presidential advisor Oscar Ivan Zuluaga told us the Party faces an existential crisis and could fall apart. Junior coalition party Colombia Democratica--led by Presidential cousin Mario Uribe--elected five members to Congress in March; two are now in jail. The party was created by Garcia and Morris, and will likely disappear.

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U Party Focused on New Leadership

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15. (C) Senator Ramirez and U Party House spokesman Luis Serrano said the U Party came out of its raucous November 14 Merlano meeting with a new sense of unity. Party congressmen hope November 26 elections for party leadership posts will revive its flagging fortunes, but there is no leading candidate. The party will pick a single leader with a six

member leadership committee (3 each from House and Senate). Ramirez, Zuluaga, "dinosaur" Senator Carlos Garcia, and Mauricio Pimiento--one of those mentioned as having possible paramilitary ties--are leading candidates. Coalition partners complain that the U Party's crisis over the Merlano case and leadership race is preventing Uribe's congressional allies from focusing on holding together the larger Uribe coalition.

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Damage to Executive Branch

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16. (C) President Uribe voiced his strong support for the justice system's investigation of corrupt congressmen and said politicians with para ties must go to jail. He committed the GOC to work with the Supreme Court in combating legislative and executive branch ties with the paramilitaries or other illegal armed groups. Senator Ramirez said that despite the political costs, the scandal offers an opportunity to clean up Colombia's political class as well as the U Party. Still, Zuluaga and presidential advisor Fabio Valencia Cossio said the scandal further complicates Uribe's efforts to obtain passage of its legislative agenda and will substantially weaken his public image.

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